The Historic Culver City Racing Scene

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by Kevin Triplett

Author's note: For the past six months, the author spent his workweek in the west Los Angeles suburb of Culver City, which led him to research the rich racing history of the community.

Certain areas of the country have always been automobile racing "hot spots," such as the pre-war "Gasoline Alley" in Paterson, New Jersey and Speedway, Indiana. Southern California has always been associated with hot rods and auto racing, but this article focuses on one small community – Culver City, which in its 96-year history, hosted two race tracks, numerous racing-related businesses, and is the hometown of an infamous Indy Car driver. The hope was to visit the historic sites, although as author Judith Freeman has pointed out that the Los Angeles area is an area "of architectural disposability…with buildings torn down, replaced by something else."

In the late 1920s Culver City became the home of its first of two race tracks after the demise of the Beverly Hills board track, built in 1919. Largely funded by Cliff Durant, the goal for the founders was for the 1-1/4 mile 35-degree banked track to be the fastest in the world. From the beginning, it was clear that the unique design by engineer Art Pillsbury (also the iron-fisted West Coast Supervisor of the American Automobile Association (AAA)) succeeded. The wooden track's inaugural event, held on February 28, 1920 was the first race of the 1920 AAA season. Jimmy Murphy, in his Duesenberg, dominated the 250-mile race — he started on the pole and won with an average speed of 103 MPH. By comparison, Ralph DePalma won the pole position for the 1920 Indianapolis "500" at only 99 MPH.

By 1924, the Beverly Hills Speedway property became far too valuable, and the Speedway Corporation made plans to build anew on the site of a failed horse-racing track in Culver City, known then (and now) as "The Heart of Screenland" as it is the home to several movie studios. In addition to having low cost land, the second factor in selecting Culver City was its strategic location on three streetcars lines. Designer Pillsbury, as at Beverly Hills, used the Searles Spiral Easement Curve, a common railroad design concept for "triple radius corners," for smooth high-speed transitions entering and exiting the new track's 45-degree banked corners. The Beverly Hills track held its final race meet on February 24, 1924, during which Harlan Fengler set a world's record of 116 MPH average for the 250 miles. After the Beverly Hills track was dissembled, the world-famous Beverly Wilshire Hotel was built on a portion of the site. Some historians claim that the Beverly Hills track was relocated to Culver City, but this seems unlikely, as Culver City featured steeper banking and the grandstands were not as luxurious as those at Beverly Hills were. In September 1924, the City of Culver City accepted the Speedway land for public street maintenance purposes. The initial goal of a 1924 Thanksgiving Day Culver City race was postponed after construction was delayed by two late fall rainstorms.

The new Culver City 1-1/4 mile track, bounded by Culver Boulevard and Overland Avenue, debuted a few weeks before Christmas in 1924 with more than 70,000 visitors in attendance. Board track specialist Bennett Hill won the 250-mile opening race in a supercharged Miller at the phenomenal average speed of 127 MPH. The inaugural meet went so smoothly that the Culver City Council adopted a resolution that commended "the officers of the Culver City Police Department for the efficient manner at which crowds at auto races held December 14 were handled."

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For the 1925 season, Culver City simply took the place of Beverly Hills on the AAA schedule. The first two-time winner of the Indianapolis "500," Tommy Milton won the season-opener while the inaugural winner Bennett Hill finished last, out after just three laps with engine failure. There were also a series of non-championship races held at Culver City in April 1925, with Leon Duray and Peter DePaolo winning 25-mile heat races and Harry Hartz winning the 40-lap feature. 35-year old board track veteran Frank Elliott won the AAA season-ending 250-mile race on November 29 1925 by 32 seconds over Harry Hartz.

Culver City saw just a single race in 1926, won by Bennett Hill, and in qualifying for the final AAA race held on March 6, 1927, Frank Lockhart set a world speed record of 144 MPH in an intercooled 91 cubic inch Miller. For comparison, the 144 MPH speed barrier was not exceeded at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway until 1956. Maintenance of board tracks was a real problem and while the Culver City board track outlasted the horse-racing track, the track disintegrated while land values skyrocketed. On August 8, 1927, the Culver City Council passed a resolution that platted the Speedway property for housing and reserved a portion bounded by Braddock Street, between Le Bourget and Motor Avenue, as the first public park in Culver City.

The second Culver City auto racing track was located at the western edge of the city on the corner of Lincoln and Washington Boulevards. The Culver City Kennel Club originally built the 1/5-mile stadium in 1932 for greyhound races that featured pari-mutual betting, and then statewide anti-gambling legislation closed it in 1934. It is unclear whether there was any pre-war midget racing, but the United Racing Association (URA) listed Culver City Stadium as a regular stop on the schedule during the post-war midget racing boom. In addition to racing, due to its proximity to the movie studios, Culver City Stadium appeared in many racing films, notably the classic *The Big Wheel*. Eventually the dirt track was paved, and around 1949, the promoters expanded the track into the parking lot, which made the ½-mile track a "figure 8." The "figure 8" track was used mostly for jalopies and motorcycles, but on occasion, the URA midgets ran that configuration. As the popularity of midget racing waned, Culver City, like many tracks, suffered from a loss of spectators. Unlike many others however, the track sat on prime real estate, and in 1954, the property was sold to Douglas Aircraft, which later built a plant and office building on the site. The old Culver City oval is now the site of a Costco department store.

Karl and Veda Orr, though best known for their land speed racing, ran a wide range of racing cars out of their speed shop located at 11140 Washington Place in Culver City. In addition to racing on the dry lakes, the Orrs owned a midget, sprint car and track roadster. Karl had relocated from Missouri around 1929, met his wife Veda in 1936, and together they opened one of the earliest Southern California speed shops in 1940. Veda was not only handy with wrenches, she raced cars at the dry lakes, setting multiple speed records, and wrote articles for racing magazines. The Orr Speed Shop location is now a barbershop.

In 1946, George Newnam opened the Norden Machine Works, a racing parts manufacturer, at 5453 West Washington Boulevard in Culver City. George Newnam manufactured a number of racing products, that included 180-degree crankshafts and camshafts for Ford flathead V-8 engines, as well as "Hyper-Tension" carburetors with dial adjustable jetting, but the company was best known for its steering gear assemblies. The Norden catalog claimed the company's Ford V-8 cast steel crankshafts were "25% lighter and eliminates crowding at the center exhaust port. The exhaust cycles are 180 degrees apart compared to stock of 90 and 270 degrees. Two pistons cross top dead center on each bank at the same time similar to a four cylinder engine, providing greater torque during acceleration and a braking effect during de-acceleration."

Fellow Culver City resident, speed shop owner and land speed racer Karl Orr successfully used Norden 180-degree crankshafts in his cars. Norden's motto "Proven at Indianapolis," was a nod to the use of Newnam-ground Offenhauser camshafts and Norden steering boxes in championship cars at the Speedway. In addition to Indy Cars, most Kurtis-Kraft and Solar midgets came equipped with Norden steering. Sometime during his career, Newnam relocated his shop to 3751 Robertson Blvd. in the Triangle section of Culver City near the film studios.

After serving in the Marines in World War 2, Jesse Sanford "Sandy" Belond approached Karl Orr with an idea for equal length headers for Ford V8-60 midget engines. Intrigued, Orr not only lent Sandy money and space in the back of Orr Speed Shop, but he also let Sandy and his family move into a small apartment behind the Orr's Culver City home. Before long, Belond had added a drive-on lift beside the Orr Speed Shop and eventually saved enough money to open his own shop at 11039 Washington Boulevard. This site is where he designed and built jigs for the first Equa-Flow exhaust systems for passenger cars, which rapidly made Belond a rich man. Beginning in 1953, Belond owned and entered cars for top-name drivers such as Johnnie Parsons and Jim Rathmann at the Speedway, but the car that made his company most famous was the one he refused to buy. Instead of buying the radical George Salih "laydown Offy," Belond offered to sponsor the car that went on to win the 1957 & 1958 Indianapolis 500-mile Classics. The original Belond shop at the corner of Washington Boulevard and Tilden Avenue today remains an automotive service center.

Culver City was also the home for a time of Halibrand Industries and Iskenderian Racing Cams. Ted Halibrand established Halibrand Engineering on Marilyn Avenue in Culver City and bought a Kurtis/Offy midget. During the war, Ted learned of the lower weight, strength, and durability of cast magnesium over aluminum parts, and he cast a set of magnesium wheels for his Kurtis-Kraft midget. The 1948 "City of Tacoma" Kurtis marked the first appearance of Halibrand magnesium wheels at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, and by 1950, Halibrand wheels replaced wire wheels on half the Indy starting field. The 1956 Indy "500" marked the last time a car equipped with wire wheels started the "500." Halibrand remained in Culver City manufacturing wheels, rear ends, brakes and steering parts until 1963 when the operation moved to Torrance, California. The old Halibrand site is now a paint supply store.

Edward "Isky" Iskenderian, who learned the cam-grinding business from the master Ed Winfield, first located at 5977 Washington Boulevard in Culver City before building on a vacant lot at 6338 West Slauson Avenue, near the southern edge of Culver City. In 1950, Iskenderian moved to a larger shop at Western and Pico Avenue in Los Angeles, and later during the 1960s, "Isky" moved to his current location across the street from Vic Edelbrock's shop. Remarkably, although Ed Iskenderian moved from the site over 60 years ago, the "Iskenderian Racing Cams" logo on the Slauson Avenue building has been preserved.

No article on Culver City racing would be complete without the mention of a driver who called the city home and became one of Indianapolis' most infamous drivers of the 1980s. Born in March 1956 in Culver City, Kevin Cogan began racing motorcycles at age seven, then moved into karts and finally the SCCA Formula car ranks while attending Torrance High School. He caught the attention of Torrance's most famous resident, the 1963 Indianapolis "500" winner Parnelli Jones. Cogan, with his movie-star good looks, started in Formula Ford, then moved up to the Atlantic series in 1976. In the 1970s, Formula Atlantic was the number one open wheel development series, and Cogan raced against such future racing stars as Tommy Gloy, Bobby Rahal, and Keke Rosberg.

In 1977 and 1978, Cogan finished in the top ten in points, but he had matured by 1979 when he posted three wins and finished second in the season points. Cogan then moved to the British Aurora Formula 1 series in 1980 and finished tenth but failed to qualify for two Formula One Grand Prix, neither the 1980 Canadian Grand Prix in a rented Williams, nor at Long Beach in 1981 in a Tyrell. Abandoning his Grand Prix dream later in 1981, Cogan qualified twelfth for his first Indianapolis "500," driving a Phoenix chassis for Jerry O'Connell of Sugar Ripe Prune fame. During the "500," Cogan ran well all day to finish fourth and then followed up that with a second place finish the next week in Milwaukee. Although the rest of the 1981 USAC season was forgettable, marred by crashes and mechanical failures, Cogan's potential caught the eye of Roger Penske. For 1982, Cogan was the number two driver behind Rick Mears. Starting second in the 1982 "500," Cogan crashed at the drop of the green flag. There has long been controversy over the cause of the crash, but whatever the cause, it followed Cogan for the rest of his career. Penske released Kevin at the end of 1982 after he finished sixth in the points, and for the next few years, Cogan struggled as he drove for second-tier teams before he landed at Patrick Racing in 1986.

After he won the 1986 season-opener at Phoenix, Cogan's career seemed to be back on track. He led the Indianapolis "500" three time for 31 laps and held the top spot with two laps to go. When the green flag was displayed, Cogan was out-dragged on the restart by fellow Formula Atlantic graduate Bobby Rahal, and though he finished second, Cogan was "the goat" again. In 1989, Kevin's driving skills were again the focus of criticism at the Speedway when he crashed into the pit area in spectacular fashion on lap 2. In 1991, driving a turbocharged Buick for John Menard in his eleventh "500" start, Cogan tangled with Roberto Guerrero and crashed hard in turn one on lap 24. Cogan was blamed for the crash, in which he suffered severe arm and leg injuries that kept him away from racing for over a year. Kevin Cogan's final Indy appearance came in 1993 when he started and finished in 14th place for Galles Racing. Although Cogan's Indianapolis career was marked with controversy, he posted seven top-fifteen finishes in twelve races.

The 11000 block of West Jefferson Boulevard in Culver City was known as "Thunder Alley," as it was the home to the shops of Lance Reventlow, TRACO Engineering, Troutman and Barnes, Dick Gulstrand, and for a brief time, the home of Jim Garner's American International Racing.

Jim Travers and Frank Coon met before World War II on the dry lakes of Southern California. After the war was over, Travers worked as a mechanic for his marine buddy, Swede Lindskog. For a while, Travers experimented with a fuel-injection system developed by Coon and Stuart Hilborn, but all realized it needed continued development. Lindskog and Travers convinced a wealthy TWA pilot, Walt Seyerly, to buy a new midget to race at Gilmore Stadium. The first night out, the new car won, but the second week — June 27, 1946 — Lindskog crashed fatally in time trials. After briefly quitting the sport, Travers next went to work for John Balch and his driver Eddie Haddad. When Blach sold his car to Superior Oil Company heir Howard Keck, Travers went along with the deal. Keck wanted to race at Indianapolis, and in addition to hiring Frank Coon as a mechanic, had Culver City craftsman Emil Deidt build a duplicate of the all-conquering front-wheel drive Blue Crown Specials. After the new car was delivered to Indianapolis' Weir Cook airport by charter in 1948, Travers and Coon became known at the Speedway derisively as "the Rich Kids." The Keck team raced the Deidt car for four years with a best finish of third in 1950, and in 1952 the Keck team entered two cars — a Ferrari and a groundbreaking new car, the Kurtis 500A "roadster" with the driveshaft running alongside the driver.

After back-to-back wins at the Speedway in 1953 and 1954 with Vukovich and the "roadster," Keck tasked Travers and Coon to develop a completely new car and engine combination which was not ready for the 1955 "500." In 1956, following the death of Bill Vukovich, the now publicity-shy Keck shut down his racing operations. In 1957, after the pair briefly worked for John Zink, Travers and Coon started TRACO Engineering at 11928 West Jefferson Boulevard in Culver City. Through the years, TRACO built countless winning racing engines for customers that included A.J. Foyt, Lance Reventlow, and Roger Penske, until Travers retired in 1981 and Coon retired in 1986. Coon left the business in the hands of Jim Jones, who later sold TRACO to Fischer Engineering in 1996. TRACO spawned a number of engine-builders that included Al Bartz, Falconer & Dunn, Frank Schmidt, and Stuart Van Dyne.

Next door to the TRACO shop at 11930 Jefferson Boulevard was the machine and pattern shop of Jim Nairn, who built patterns for Hilborn fuel injectors, Edelbrock parts, and other speed parts suppliers. Nairn worked with Travers and Coons for many years, including serving on the 1953 and 1954 Indy 500-winning pit crew. In 1957, Nairn's shop became the home of Reventlow Automobiles Incorporated (RAI). Lawrence Graf von Haugwitz-Hardenberg-Reventlow, known as "Lance Reventlow" was the only child of Barbara Hutton, the Woolworth department store heiress. Lance became interested in racing through his mom's third (of seven) husbands, Prince Igor Nikolayevich Troubetzkoy, the winner of the 1948 Targa Floria sports car race. As a wealthy young man, Lance purchased and raced the finest sports cars across Europe, but he wanted to build his own cars to compete in Europe, so RAI was born. Lance hired Warren Olson as team manager, Chuck Daigh as a driver and engineer, and two former Kurtis employees, Dick Troutman and Tom Barnes, as fabricators. At first, the team built a series of successful sports cars known as Scarabs that borrowed much from Troutman and Barnes' 1954 "Special," but Reventlow wanted to race in Europe with Formula 1, so he hired Leo Goosen to design a new desmodromic valve (opened and closed by the camshaft) engine to be built by TRACO. The front-engine car that debuted in 1959 used many southern California products and the skills of local craftsmen, but its design was too late, as winning Formula 1 cars had already transitioned to rear-engine designs.

After the disastrous 1960 season in Europe (with a best finish of 10th) when the team returned to the States, the RAI shop moved to Princeton Drive in nearby Venice. RAI shut down in 1962 after having spent more than $1.5 million to build seven (or eight) cars with no legitimate business product as a result — as the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) only allowed such losses to be deducted for a maximum of five years. The RAI Venice building was taken over by a retired Texas racer named Carroll Shelby to convert the early Cobra sports cars. With the departure of RAI, Nairn returned to his shop at 11930 West Jefferson. Jim's son, Scott Nairn, still runs Speedway Pattern & Manufacturing at the same location.

After the Reventlow/Scarab fiasco, metal forming expert Dick Troutman and his partner, mechanical engineer Tom Barnes — who had a long history of designing and building customer specialty and sports cars, returned to their shop on "Thunder Alley." As mentioned earlier, both of the men learned their craft working for Frank Kurtis, and had some Indianapolis experience, having worked with Chuck Daigh when he drove for J.C. Agajanian at the Speedway in 1959, only to run afoul of "Aggie's" crew chief Frank McGurk. Using modified Scarab plans and a TRACO powerplant, Troutman and Barnes built their "Riverside Sports Racer," which attracted the attention of a young Texas oilman and sports car racer Jim Hall, who bought the first two cars and dubbed them the "Chaparral." Troutman and Barnes later sold three more "Chaparral" copies based upon Hall's success. In between racing projects and restoring antique cars, Troutman and Barnes built the aluminum bodied Mustang I show car for Ford in 1962, a four-door Porsche 911, and an El Camino based transporter.

In 1964, J.C. Agajanian commissioned the pair to build a new rear-engine Offenhauser-powered Indianapolis entry. Parnelli Jones tested the car at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway early in the month of May at 151 MPH — fast enough to make the field — but Jones chose to stick with his 1963 Indy "500" winning front engine Watson roadster known as "Calhoun." Later in the 1964 season, in July at Trenton, Jones again tried the Troutman/Barnes car — which visually resembled the 1963 Lotus 29 — only to crash into the third turn guardrail during practice. The car was quickly repaired, and a month later at Milwaukee, Al Unser, made his maiden USAC championship car oval track start in the machine and finished 22nd after the Offenhauser engine failed on lap 51. Agajanian sold the car to Denver trucking magnate Myron Osborn, but Bill Cheesbourg failed to qualify the car at the second Phoenix race in 1965, and at the 1966 Atlanta USAC race, sports car racer Dick Guldstrand, in his only USAC appearance, crashed the Troutman-Barnes in practice driving for Culver City's Louis Senter of Ansen Wheels fame. The location of this first and only Troutman-Barnes Indy car is unknown. Troutman & Barnes relocated their shop to Costa Mesa in 1976. Dick passed away in 1992 and Tom in 2008.

Another resident of "Thunder Alley" was the shop of Corvette racer Dick Guldstrand at 11924 West Jefferson Boulevard in Culver City. Guldstrand started racing jalopies at Culver City Stadium as a youngster, but after college, he raced Corvettes for local dealer Baher Chevrolet. From 1963 to 1965, Dick won three SCCA Pacific Coast titles and was named 1964 California sports car driver of the year. In 1966, Dick won the GT title at the 24 hours of Daytona, yet his entry for the Indianapolis "500" was declined due to a lack of experience. Later in 1966, he crashed Louis Senter's Indy car in practice at Atlanta in his only Indy car appearance. In 1968, Dick opened his own shop with financial help from actor James Garner who housed his short-lived racing team for one season in Guldstrand's Culver City Quonset building. By 1970, Guldstrand Engineering was the number one supplier of racing Corvettes on the West Coast. Although Dick has moved his main shop to Burbank, he still owns the shop on West Jefferson.

Stuart Hilborn started his racing career in 1938 on the dry lakes, and after serving in World War II as an aviation mechanic, came home to 3430 Caroline Avenue in Culver City with the idea of applying fuel injection to racing cars. Hilborn's initial experiment was successful, as he became the first driver to exceed 150 MPH on the Lakes. Stu approached his friend Jim Travers with the idea of fuel injection for midgets, but perfection of the concept took until 1948. One year later, Hilborn's constant flow fuel injection system debuted at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway 1949 with that one system passed among six cars in qualifying. Fuel injection caught on quickly at the Speedway, and by 1952, six of the first seven cars to finish the "500" used fuel injection, and Vukovich captured the first "500" win for Fuel Injection Engineering in 1953.

Hilborn, now based in Santa Monica, claims 34 Indianapolis wins for their systems, and over 60 years after its introduction, the Hilborn fuel injection system remains the standard

for sprint cars and midgets.

Kevin Triplett is an auto-racing historian and writer from Walnut Creek, California. Born into an auto racing family — his great-uncle was Ernie Triplett, the 1931 and 1932 AAA Pacific Coast champion and 5-time time Indianapolis 500 starter — Kevin serves on the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame and the National Midget Auto Racing Hall of Fame induction committees. Contact Kevin via e-mail at kevracerhistory@aol.com.

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